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REFLECTIVE ABILITY AS A CORE COMPETENCE OF FUTURE TEACHERS

Abstract

This paper focuses on the exploration of the development of reflective ability as a core competence of prospective teachers. How can reflection and discourse competence be developed by teacher students during their teacher education studies?

Currently a method that is experimentally applied in the field of teacher education at the University of Innsbruck is being designed as a module for teacher education to stimulate students' reflective competence.

By using the method of the Pedagogical Reflective Interview (Christof, 2009) processes of teacher students reflecting on pedagogical crisis situations can be explored. The aim is to develop a new module for teacher education in order to continue the professionalization of the teacher education studies. A new model of teacher professionalism favors teachers as reflective practitioners (Schön, 1991; Moore, 2007)

Reflection and discourse ability is therefore one of the core competences of the teaching profession. The reflection of one's own educational action serves to develop a professional teaching self. This refers to a professional teaching self with the important ability to reflect continuously at the moment of educational action and in retrospect.

Teacher students learn to apply the method of the pedagogical reflective interview (Christof, 2009) and also gain experiences as interviewees as they are researchers and respondents at the same time. An example shows how to apply this method in the field of teacher education.

Introduction

There are various studies about the quality of schools and the professionalization of teachers. Some studies have developed competence models for future teachers. They define competence areas in which teachers have to develop certain skills to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world. These so called domains of teacher professionalism are: reflection and discourse ability, awareness of professionalism, personal mastery, collegiality and ability to differentiate (www.schule.epik.at).

The intention of the pedagogical reflective interview is to identify unnoticed learning processes and support them methodically in order to stimulate the interviewee's reflection process. Reflection on professional activity is based on the reconstruction of subjective theories (Groeben, 1988). The student's/The subject's own perception of a pedagogical crisis situation is examined for inconsistencies and breaks. This changed perspective opens up new possibilities of action. The goal of the pedagogical reflective interview materializes in a transitory formation process (Alheit, 1993) which equally affects subject and structure.

About 40 students have participated in university courses that used the method of the pedagogical reflective interview in the last two years. There is shown one example of this reflection process out of one interview.

During the interview students follow a process of reflection with colleagues and experience this process also as respondent. By reflecting a crisis situation from their own everyday teaching experiences they gain a scheme for reflection which is also applicable to other situations.

The documentation of the specific steps of this research program forms a basis for further analysis – such as creating a typology – to provide additional insights for the field of teacher education and training.

One main goal is to help the students become reflective practitioners (Schön, 1991; Moore, 2007). Theory is used to reflect everyday classroom practice and to broaden the pedagogical expertise in a learning manner. Consequently teachers act increasingly more professional. Existing pedagogical theories are reviewed in practice and are expanded with findings from the field.

Theoretical framework

The roles of teachers in the 21st century are changing. Teacher education studies at the university have to prepare future teachers for a new professional identity. Children and young people grow up in a global world and their education should prepare them for living and working in a global society. Today schools have to face a lot of challenges such as economic growth, social change and cultural diversity. School should enable every learner to develop knowledge, understanding, skills, values and attitudes to participate actively in a global world. There are new ideas on learning like: learner in the centre, active participation, learning how to learn, learning styles, self-regulated learners. Therefore the quality of teaching is evaluated in many contexts. The evidence suggests that the main factor of the variation in pupils' learning outcomes is the quality of teachers.

One of the key questions is: What is that teachers need to know, care about and be able to do to develop their own and others' learning? How can teacher students develop a professional self and all the competences to meet these challenges? What are the central aspects of a "professional self"?

The Austrian ministry of education has set up a team of experts of the field of education working together in the project DEPIC (Developing of Professionalization in an International Context). So far, the group has devised the basics from which to develop professionalization and eventually put this notion into practice. The immediate concern of DEPIC is "developing professionalization of (future) Austrian teachers in an international setting" (Schratz et al, 2007). These domains of teacher professionalism are: reflection and discourse ability, awareness of professionalism, personal mastery, collegiality and ability to differentiate. The teacher education at the University of Innsbruck has taken up certain aims of the DEPIC-concept and implemented them in the curriculum of teacher training. According to Schratz et al (2007) five domains have been devised in which professionalization of teachers becomes apparent. "Domains" in this context refers to certain recurring topics which are central to the scientific discussion about professionalization (Schratz et al, 2007, p. 70 and <http://epik.schule.at/>).

As to reflective and discursive capabilities, teachers broaden their knowledge and skills acquired in their jobs in professional discourse with their colleagues. "Terminology being vastly heterogeneous, throughout educational scientific discussion there is the argument that professionalism and reflectivity respectively the ability to reflect upon certain issues are to be seen in close interdependence. The formula 'professionalism by reflectivity' seems to be the common denominator." (Schratz et al, 2007, p. 74f. referring to Reh, 2004, p. 360).

The second domain is the professional awareness of teachers, i.e. perceiving oneself as an expert in one's profession. "Professional awareness means realising what makes the teaching profession a profession in its own right and thus drawing a clear line to other (social) jobs. At the same time teachers with professional awareness see themselves as part of a national and regional educational field which they form and by which they have been formed. They also see themselves as part of an international profession." (ibid., p. 76).

The third domain named by Schratz et al (2007) is collegiality, which they also define as productivity of cooperation. The authors advocate a change of paradigms, away from the image of the teacher as the lone fighter towards realising the potential of a useful discourse among colleagues.

Variety is an integral part of a teacher's daily work. The fourth domain, ability to differentiate, defines handling varieties in a productive way. "The ability to differentiate requires the knowledge to handle different situations in learning, communication and integration. It also requires the ability to offer individualising and differentiating teaching methods wherever they seem useful. Moreover it requires the ability to initiate a self-organised process of learning which individualises the learning process or stresses certain contents." (Schratz et al, 2007, p. 78).

The fifth domain of teaching professionalism is personal mastery which refers to the power of individual know-how. "For teachers – the same applies to students – it is not only important to know what and to know how. Professionalism means effectively using know-how and know-what according to situational requirements." (ibid., p. 78f).

The present research project focuses particularly on developing reflective and discourse ability of teacher students.

To develop reflective and discursive competence of future teachers it is essential for them to learn to critically view and analyse themselves and their professional role from a certain distance. By applying a specific (social research) method they are instructed to go through a process of self-reflection to evaluate effects of future action. Reflecting not only on personal but also on structural conditions in which the teacher finds her/himself is crucial for their professionalization. Therefore, school as an organizational entity and the teaching profession itself as basic structures of the educational field have to be scrutinized.

In the seminar the teacher students are asked to verbalize a situational interaction in pedagogical settings, in which they didn't succeed – from their perspective. The position of the teacher as a lone fighter, as mentioned above, is cracked open by showing individual teaching experiences and thus disclosing individual interpretations and "private theories" about ongoing processes. Consequently these processes are being discussed. The participants' implicit

awareness of pedagogical situations becomes explicit and gains importance in theoretical analysis.

Methodology

One method that originates from the field of qualitative educational research – the Pedagogical Reflective Interview (Christof, 2009) – is applied in a teacher education course at the University of Innsbruck.

The Pedagogical Reflective Interview focuses on processes that always occur when methods of the social sciences – which are some kind of interaction – are used. With these processes a pedagogic concern shall be met. It is not possible to control these processes completely. The intention of applying this method is to identify unnoticed learning processes and support them methodically, in order to stimulate the interviewee's educational reflection process. The process of reflection on professional activity is based on the reconstruction of subjective theories (Groeben, 1988). The participant's perception of a pedagogical crisis situation is examined for inconsistencies and breaks. This should result in a changed perspective, which opens up new possibilities of action. The goal of this process materializes in a transitory formation process (Alheit, 1993) – which equally affects subject and structure.

In qualitative interviews on educational issues two processes intersect. On the one hand there is a reconstruction of subjective theories, subjective meaning which is deciphering general structures of meaning. On the other hand there is necessarily a reflection of one's actions – by the descriptions in the interview – which leads to thinking about changes of one's own actions or thinking about changes of behavior. Necessarily, processes are stimulated which could be understood as learning and educational processes – if they are reflected. A structural superposition of learning processes becomes manifest in research situations, working with methods to reconstruct meanings.

There is also production of meaning and knowledge in interview situations on different levels. Implicit or "tacit" taken for granted knowledge must be made explicit in the interview process – a self-reflection process. The interaction between the interviewee and respondent produces communicative knowledge. On the individual level this means the explanation of practical knowledge, whereas on structural level implicit knowledge, the knowledge of rules is explained. A process of reflection on professional activity is based on the reconstruction of subjective theories (Groeben, 1988). In this process, the recovered space for thinking and action is reversed and develops its educational potential for reflective ability.

The potential of the application of this method is the identification of unnoticed individual constructions and their relation to structural frameworks. This process materializes in a transitory formation process (Alheit, 1993) which relates to the subject and the structural background. The interview is also a mediation between objective and subjective reality. In the interview there is a transformation of meaning attributions – interpretations are questioned and possibly revised. Distance to one's own actions can help to see a larger repertoire of acting in specific (pedagogical) situations. This is a continuous development of pedagogical professionalism of (future) teachers.

In the course at the University of Innsbruck students learn about the theoretical background of this method and they also learn to apply it. They are researchers and

respondents at the same time: On the one hand, every student goes through this process of reflection as an observer – reflectivity can be experienced from an outside perspective. On the other hand, each student turns out to be a respondent – he/she is supported in reflecting a crisis situation from his/her teaching experience. The students acquire a tool for reflection, which is also applicable for other (crisis) pedagogical situations.

Steps of the pedagogical reflective interview

1. Developing an interview guideline
2. Carrying out the interview – exploring a pedagogical crisis situation
3. Transcription
4. Analysis of the interview (with focus on the crisis situation) according to the concept of subjective theories (Groeben et al., 1988) and qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2003)
5. Feedback with structural analysis of the reflection process
6. Exploring the impact on the self-concept
7. Broadening options to act in similar or other pedagogical situations

Example for an analysis

This is an example from a teacher Training course at the University of Innsbruck. Teachers students were conducting interviews with their colleagues to the topic of “reflecting on a pedagogical crisis situation of their own pedagogical experiences”.

During the interview a teacher student tells about a difficult classroom situation. Prehistory:

“I taught in a kind of pilot program, there were some students with special needs. This is a class in which we are particularly team-teaching, especially during intense phases. (...) Another is slightly autistic. He has a kind of syndrome. And my supervisor told me beforehand about the class, the special needs of the students and about the one with the autistic syndrome. But I've totally forgotten about that, otherwise ... well, I don't know ...”

Situation:

“A colleague and I we did that team-teaching and we organized group work for the class. They should work together about certain tasks like epochs in the history like baroque. (...) As we divided the students into groups, the one, the autistic boy was not in the classroom. I think he was on the toilet or something and then there was no group willing to let him participate in their work. Then he went away and did something else, first of all he didn't do anything. I went back to him and told him, that this is not okay, he has to work with them and he has to integrate in the group. But the other group members said "Well, when he takes part in the group work he will always mess up" and so on (sigh). Yes, I just told them, that they should integrate him.” (...)

“And when the presentation of the results of the group work started the group, where the student with the autistic syndrome participated, came out. They started the presentation and the boy with the syndrome suddenly turned to the board and began to scribble swear words on the board. I tried to stop him but he didn’t react.”

Analyze perception of the other - items of situational awareness:

- *A student shows autistic features, a physician-confirmed disease.*
- *As we divided the students into groups, the autistic boy was not in the classroom, he was probably in the bathroom.*
- *The group doesn’t like the autistic boy, and wouldn’t let him participate.*
- *„Such a person“ has to be treated differently than „normal“ students.*
- *Autistic children have special needs in terms of physical contact.*
- *You have to be careful with autistic students regarding privacy.*
- *Autistic children should be touched firmly and consciously.*
- *The student turns to the board and scribbles swearwords.*

Structural analysis of the reflection process:

- Selection of an element:
 - *The student turns to the board and scribbles swearwords.*
- Interpretation of the behaviour:
 - *The student disregards the authority of the teacher and wants to provoke him.*
- Perspective of another person:
 - *The student did not want to annoy the teacher but much more his classmates. Maybe he wanted to pay them back, that they have excluded him. What he has always wanted to tell them, he simply wrote on the board.*

Implications for personal actions:

- The sharp criticism of the autistic student could just relate to his classmates, and not to the teacher student.
- This different interpretation raises other, alternative options for action.
- As a conclusion the teacher student implied to emphasize on exercises to strengthen the class community as this seems to be precisely the problem.

Expected outcomes/results

The documentation of the steps of this research program is a data basis for further analysis. The analysis of the interviews does not search for single statements of the respondents, but wants to document the process of reflection. The first step of analysis is to explore every single reflection process of the interviewees – like in the presented example. The next step looks for structural elements – are there any differences, similarities, any recurring issues? The goal of this analysis is to create a typology, which continuatively provides additional insights for the field of teacher education and in service teacher training.

Students adopt schemes to reflect their own practical experiences to continuously build up their professional self – to get an identity as reflective practitioners (Schön, 1991; Moore, 2007). Theory should be seen as a template to get new insights and to support solving practical problems. Reflecting everyday

classroom experience helps teachers to broaden their pedagogical expertise in a learning manner. Reflecting pedagogical (crisis) situations with a theoretical background enables teachers to build up their professional self step by step.

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